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"Me in Place, and the Place in Me"

A MIGRANT'S TALE OF FOOD, HOME AND BELONGING

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Abstract

In this memoir, the central of role of food in the life of migrants is recalled in the story of an Indian family's journey to Britain in the 1950s, a time when very few South Asian restaurants or shops had been established. The memoir seeks to redress the imbalance in much writing on food and migration, where food is the primary focus, and migrants and their journeys tend to form a rather ghostly backdrop to the culinary action. The family's quest for the "food of home" highlights the centrality of culinary practices in their lives, and the relationship between food and ideas of home and belonging. It provides an alternative window into an intimate world of food and migration, offering insights into both the inner space of the migrant psyche, and outer, mobile, food geographies and social histories. Food practices are explored as a grammar for a politics of the migrant self.

Keywords: migration histories, food practices, home, belonging, affective association, migrant selfhood

I walk along Tooting High Street, surrounded by the smells, sounds and colors of South Asian restaurants, grocery stores and clothes shops which line both sides of the road. It resembles a puzzle of the subcontinent whose pieces have been haphazardly thrown back together. The Punjab, Gujarat by way of East Africa, Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu are recreated in a new geography on the London landscape. A dozen languages fill the air and none of them are English. I make my way to Dadu's supermarket and head for the aisle displaying tamarind. The choice is quite dazzling but I go for a packet of dark sticky pulp, thick with seeds, one sure to add the sour taste I crave in my Indian cooking. As I leave, I am reminded of a time when there was no tamarind to be found in London.

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I come from a family of migrants, and food has played a crucial role in our migrant lives. Preparing and eating the food of home taught us ways of "being Indian" when we arrived in Britain. Our food also brought us some comfort and certainty when our new world seemed threatening. It helped repair spatial and temporal ruptures, and evoked the feelings of elsewhere which haunt, but also nourish, the migrant imagination. Food provided "frameworks of memory" as it mediated between our present selves and our pre-migrant lives. In many ways, our food set us apart, but it also helped us find acceptance, creating new emotional attachments and communities of belonging. The food of home, and our food memories of "before" have afforded us pathways for revisiting and re-evaluating past selves, as well as providing sites for the imagination of future possibilities. Above all perhaps, our food practices can be read as a grammar for a politics of the migrant self, making visible untidy, unstable relationships, and subjecting them to ongoing interrogation and interpretation.

I was born in South India to parents who both felt like outsiders in their social worlds. Both were rebellious and restless, and each a source of anxiety to their respective families. Through travel, my mother and father discovered other possibilities in life, possibilities that loosened their domestic moorings and gave them the chance to escape from homes they found restrictive. As a consequence, my family was never rooted as were those of most of my peers as I grew up. In 1944, at the close of the Second World War, my father fought in the British army in Japan. He was forever changed by the experience. It was there he first met Indians from other parts of the subcontinent, as well as British and Australian soldiers. He also discovered for the first time that he was "Indian" in ways quite different to his idea of himself when growing up in Tamil Nadu. He came to consider himself a "modern" man, secular, democratic and unbound by caste, or so he liked to believe. After he found this bigger world, Madras would never again be enough for him. Post independence, my mother, a classical Indian dancer, traveled the globe on cultural tours for the Indian government. It was one of the ways the new nation presented itself to the outside world. She too was transformed in the process. After these experiences, neither of them could settle back in to the conservative life that dominated much of South India in the 1940s and 1950s.

When I was very young, it seemed as if my parents came and went, but rarely stayed put. I didn't know them very well, and was mostly cared for by my maternal grandmother. My earliest food memory is with Ajama on our veranda in Madras. It was there she fed me little balls of rice mixed with curds and sambhar. The veranda floor was covered with mosaic tiles in shades of blue and green, and they always felt cool beneath my tiny bare toes, even in the searing midday heat. A small statue of Krishna watched over us from his place by the lily pond, and by early evening the air was flooded with the smell of jasmine flowers. Ajama always urged me to eat "just one more" little ball of rice. A highly respected doctor, she was determined to keep me well at all costs. I was her first granddaughter, and much loved and nurtured, fed until plump, and inoculated against everything. I was given vitamin C tablets every day to keep

me safe from marauding germs, and they were better than sweets to me, the foundation of my love for all things sour. Not so welcome were the injections Ajama sometimes administered. I was winkled out from my hiding places in the garden, brought back to the house kicking and screaming, and made to take my medicine, like it or not.

The veranda was our special place. It offered glimpses of the smells, sounds and bustle of the city that lay beyond our garden walls. It was where Ajama told me stories, and whispered that my mother would soon be home. Vendors came and rattled the iron gates. They offered us ribbons in all shades of the rainbow, as well as mirrors and brightly colored plastic toys. In the mornings, standing on tip-toe, I also caught sight of the milkman from there, with his reluctant cow in tow. I watched entranced as the skinny beast was milked by the open garden gate. In the street beyond, I could just catch glimpses of bicycles, cars and buses speeding by, and hear their bells and horns competing with one another. The buses always won the contest. Back in our compound, the milk was poured into metal cans which were kitchen bound, a place of alchemy to me. "Ever silver" vessels glinted against the smoke-blackened walls, and our gap-toothed cook, who was not to be messed with, ground pulses with a giant pestle and mortar, or picked through rice as he sat on the cold cement floor. Nair was invariably surrounded by helpers, a sign of his elevated position in our home. He boiled the milk to within an inch of its life, before it was deemed safe to drink. We were given the white liquid in stainless steel cups, filled to the brim. Warm, thin and sweetened with sugar, with a skin which formed on top, the milk was truly disgusting. I devised ways to dispose of it surreptitiously, praying I wouldn't be caught. It was a skill I took with me to London.

My parents met at Presidency College after my father returned from the war. They often walked on Marina Beach, and ate roasted peanuts in cones made from newspaper. My father once told me the inky text added something special to the taste. In the early evening, the beach was the only place to be, the center of the social life of the old colonial city. Here, the cool sea breeze offered relief from the sticky humid heat. Trinkets made of sea shells tinkled in the wind. High above, kites jostled for space. Their strings covered with small shards of glass, they tried to cut each other down, and make the sky their own. Endless stalls studded the edge of the sand, offering piping hot vadais and bondas to eat. The shoreline was the place where many young men and women imagined that they fell in love. It was also where the ashes of the dead were scattered in the sea. Sitting crossed-legged, drawing faces in the sand, my parents looked across the water and dreamed of being elsewhere. Soon after, they had a "love marriage," an act of immense rebellion against both their families, or so I have been told.

In 1953, my father sailed for England on the SS Strathnaver. He was to study for an MA in English literature at Oxford. Going to England for an education was one of the few ways that young men from my father's background could legitimately travel at that time. At New College, he flourished academically, and in his small way, gained quite a reputation. His tutor declared him to be "by

far the ablest man I've ever had the temerity to try to teach" with "vast stores of knowledge" that he clearly found surprising in a young student from the colonies. My father settled quickly, and honed his debating skills, first practiced while still a schoolboy in Madras. Indian independence and the demise of empire were firm favorites among the many Indian students there. He also strolled in the flower-filled college garden that clung to the city walls, and discussed obscure points of literary theory with his new-found student friends, which was his idea of fun. In his wood-paneled rooms, he drank neat whiskey, no ice, and smoked and talked into the dark of night. In the fuggy haze of smoke, and sour-tasting liquid, my father believed he had found his freedom. The downside was the dining hall. With its cold leaden flagstones, and walls grave with the weight of history, the smell of boiled cabbage was enough to kill his appetite, and suet pudding lay heavy on his soul.

My father wanted to remain in postwar Britain, though he wrote to my mother that it was "a little cold, damp and drab." He wished to embrace this modern cosmopolitan world. It was an overt rejection of his Brahmanical roots. His love affair with English literature belittled Indian tradition. He dismissed Hinduism as "little more than superstition." And he flaunted family conventions. In England, drinking whiskey and eating meat literally made him a new man. He saw himself as someone who was at home in the world, wherever he might be. But his craving for the food of South India never left him, and remained a visceral tie to the homeland he tried so hard to discard. Chili and spice are addictions that are not easy to leave behind. Once in control of your pallet, they remain with you for life.

After I was born, my mother continued touring, dancing her way through Europe, the Soviet Union and China. Returning to Madras always seemed like an unwelcome constriction to her expanding universe. She needed little persuasion to come and live in Britain. When my father sent for us, it was as if he was making arrangements for three strangers to come together. Our common task was to assemble a family from the raw materials. I still remember the brown paper parcel that he sent from England, prior to our departure. All neatly folded and ready for my trip "overseas" were some small tartan trousers, a T-shirt and duffle coat, and strangest of all, socks and shoes. These were not just clothes. The trousers felt strange to the touch, thick and itchy, in anticipation of the weather that was to greet us in London. The laces on the shoes were a source of trepidation, and threatened to contain my small feet, which had always enjoyed their freedom. These clothes marked the new person I was to become. I would no longer be just a little girl, running quite wild in the garden. Never again would I be simply an "Indian." And none of us were ever to feel "at home" again in any straightforward way.

We were soon to be marked by that migrant malaise, forever questioned about who we were, where we came from, and where we really belonged. We quickly understood that we disappointed people if we replied that these things didn't, and shouldn't, really matter, and that we were citizens of the world. We learned to create more complex stories of belonging, and in the process we

also changed the way we thought about ourselves. We had to learn how to enact the migrant's life. In the process, home became "elsewhere." We no longer had a straightforward narrative of "here" and "there." For us, home became more liquid, a shifting reservoir of our hopes, desires and dreams. Home was most often evoked listening to Indian music, and through the visceral pleasures of preparing and eating Indian food. The heady smell of lentils cooking on the stove, redolent with salt and spice, and sour with tamarind; this was home.

I have used the concept of being "Indian" as if it were unproblematic, but it was not so straightforward. We were never going to be "English," but what exactly did it mean to be an Indian in London in the 1950s? We were Tamils, and in some ways shared little with the Bengalis, Punjabis or Gujaratis that also found themselves there. Caste, class, language and religion potentially divided us. Indian national identity was stitched together, and tended to unravel when brought under scrutiny. One thing was clear, however; being Indian involved eating Indian food. But we did not think of food as something that healed us and made us whole. My family did not experience migration as a rupture when we first arrived; instead, we sought freedom, opportunity and a chance to embrace the modern world. Our feelings of loss came later, when we remained outsiders in our new home, and faced the polite, and sometimes not so polite, racisms, so "cosily inserted," as Stuart Hall expresses it, in the heart of British liberalism. This was, of course, the English way, and formed the background noise to our migrant lives.

My mother and I arrived in London on a cold spring morning in April 1956. By then, my father had started work as a journalist at the BBC, armed with his degree from Oxford. Family legend had it that he obtained the highest MA marks at New College for 32 years. The legend would be repeated in hushed tones many times over the years. In England, Winifred Atwell topped the charts and commercial television had just begun. Grace Kelly was about to marry Prince Rainier of Monaco, much to my mother's delight. I, however, can only recall this London as a succession of black and white smudges, cold, damp and full of strange smells. It appeared in monochrome to my four-year-old self, compared with Madras and its vivid tastes, sounds and textures. The cold seemed to wash out the colors and dampen our sensations. We have a photo of my mother taken shortly after we arrived. She looks quite miserable, wrapped in several layers of clothes. Her first taste of English tea drew expressions of disgust. It bore little relation to the strong sweet milky beverage we drank back home. But it was my reunion with my father which stopped me feeling lost. A virtual stranger, he nevertheless became the object of my unequivocal love. A Senior Service permanently clutched between his fingers, he blew smoke rings as I looked on in wide-eyed wonder. I considered them examples of his superhuman powers. As he held my hand I felt safe, loved and cared for, and suddenly I was complete. No more staring at the gates, wondering when he would return. And making me whole was perhaps his most magical power of all.

Our plane journey brought us to London, but the journey could not be measured in mere distance or time. We had left behind a city full of powerful

aromas, and large, if slightly crumbling, grand houses, gardens filled with mangos and jackfruit, with parakeets in the trees, to come and live in a small flat in Putney, in suburban south London. We had also left behind sprawling extended families. In their place there was just me and my parents. Our new flat, with its dark wallpaper and no outside space, was a small prison. On arriving in Putney, my mother's disappointment came off her in waves, but somehow she managed to smile. Our new home looked forbidding, a few small rooms in a converted Victorian terrace. It was freezing in winter and basic at best, with one gas fire which we fed with coins, our only source of heat. Our milk came in bottles and the streets were deadly quiet. No sound of voices competing for space or car horns announcing the driver's every move. Paradoxically, however, our flat also contained the possibility of liberation. It freed my parents from the policing, kindly and otherwise, so often visited on members of Indian families. And although the kitchen was tiny, it had a gas cooker, promising fire at the stroke of a match!

We also left behind our servants, cooks and ayahs and now had to learn to fend for ourselves. This was democratizing in more ways than one. For my father, with his time in the army and then at college, the move was perhaps less daunting. He had survived the food in Oxford armed with bottles of chili sauce, and the pungent pickles he had brought from home. But for my mother, it was the first time in her life that she had to cook and clean for herself, let alone others. In Madras and on tour she had been rather well looked after.

Our migrant tale was soon defined by our quest for the food of Tamil Nadu. But my mother couldn't cook when she came to England. She had none of the embodied memories or the performance of cooking "home," so often conjured up in the literature on food and migration. In Madras she rarely entered the kitchen. As she often told me when we reminisced about this time, "I couldn't even boil water, let alone an egg."

And how can you create and nurture a family without food? Clearly, my mother had to learn to cook, and she had to do this in a strange and foreign land. She had no Indian cookery books, rationing had only recently ended, and the arteries of Indian restaurants that were to thread their way through postwar London, nourishing future Indian migrant generations, and seducing the "locals," had barely begun to flow. These culinary futures were still embryonic when we arrived. There were only 300 "curry houses" in England in 1950 compared with more than 12,000 now. There were still fewer Indian grocery stores, providing a lifeblood of foods and spices. Finding the right ingredients was always a "quest," and also made us rely on packages from home. They arrived covered in hessian cloth, stitched at the seams and sealed with red wax, and were filled with staples and treats.

It goes without saying that my mother had to learn to cook South Indian food. For our family to exist on an English diet would simply have been unthinkable, a possibility that provoked extreme anxiety. Bland, overcooked and soggy, it smelt strange, it was alien, and my mother considered it unhealthy. She did, however, embrace the free orange juice all children were

given in postwar Britain. It was administered at the doctor's surgery, much like medicine. I remember it as the best orange juice I've ever had, and how it sweetened the sickening taste of cod liver oil forced down us at the same time.

Some western foods inevitably entered our culinary lives, but ironically, given my mother's concerns, they came from the "unhealthy" end of the English food spectrum. I was introduced to an English diet through my school dinners, an experience that still dictates my dislike of "meat and two veg." I did, however, become fond of certain things. Cornflakes and baked beans found a place in my affections. I started my love affair with cheese. I became slightly obsessed with mashed potatoes, my ultimate English treat. My horizons were limited because my mother never became adept at cooking English, or western food. It was always something I ate outside the house. Much to my embarrassment, when my friends came back for tea, my mother always offered them frozen fare. In the early days, we somehow thought it inappropriate to offer them our home cuisine. It seemed a step too far that might obliterate our small efforts towards social acceptance. So none of my friends could have guessed at the prowess my mother developed in the kitchen; her skills at balancing spices, and cooking dishes whose depth of flavor made your mouth water in anticipation. How things were to change. In later years, to be invited to our home and not be given curry would have seemed an affront, as if we hadn't bothered to cook "properly."

Our staple diet was South Indian food, and trite as it sounds, it was an embodiment of our Indianness, to ourselves and to others. Sambhar, rasam, dosai, idlis, her special potato curry, puris and vendakar puchidee, thaira vadai, and best of all, rice, curds and pickles, without which no meal was complete; these were the things that sustained us. Eating with our hands was crucial. It enhanced taste and our satisfaction of having eaten well. To attempt to eat Indian food with a knife and fork was an invitation to ridicule, to adopt airs and graces which risked a loss of self. These foods also kept us healthy. My mother came from a family of doctors, and much of what we ate was closely tied to their ideas of wellbeing. Rice and curds cured an upset stomach. Only rasam brought relief from colds. Chilies were vital for the rituals required when someone cast an "evil eye" over one of us. Food not only made us what we were, it also watched over us. Mixing up the modern and the traditional, religious and secular seemed completely normal to us.

Although we set about recreating the food of home, our culinary experiments were not so much about things past as things present. Learning to cook, shopping, and running the house were the mundane activities which gave shape to the modern bodies we now inhabited. They were new performances on an alien culinary stage. Deliberately flaunting dietary laws was an important part of our newly discovered modernity. As time went by, our food became entangled with memories and a sense of what we had left behind or even thought we had lost. However, this only developed as our relationship changed with our home elsewhere and our home of here and now.

In many ways, Indian food became the center of our social world. But there were no spices to be found on Putney High Street. In the early days, gathering the right ingredients to cook Indian food involved trips across town from south London to Drummond Street, which was at the time merely a glint in the eye of its current Asian self. My favorite place was a small shop with a cafe at the back run by a young Muslim man from Pakistan. He sold spices and pulses not seen in English shops, and vegetables unavailable elsewhere. Getting there was an excursion, an adventure embarked on by at least two families. We traveled across London and at our journey's end peered at spices and vegetables we didn't know what to do with. In the process, we came to know and love the city, little realizing we too were contributing to its complex archaeology. We learned that London too was home to many tastes and smells, if only we could recognize them. We gradually became familiar with London, and London became homely. If we belonged to any place, it came to be this city. Not England, nor Britain, for once we stepped outside the city limits, we were once more rendered strange.

The migrant stores where we bought our food also exposed the networks of migrant goods, services and labor that formed the city's beating heart. They perforated the spaces of the national landscape, opening it up to other histories. The creative appropriation of pavements and store fronts by shopkeepers rendered migrants visible, and unsettled conventional regimes of taste. It contributed to the discrepant, but intimate worlds that make up London.

Shopping for food created visceral pleasures beyond our neighborhoods and "natural" circle of friends. Shopkeepers educated us in the grammar of buying the right things. They were often willing to import new food they did not stock. They became our confidantes and advisers. We bought ingredients, and experimented and eventually mastered them. Creating our domestic cuisine was made easier when we got to know a few South Indian professional cooks who had come to London to work. Although they were careful not to lay bare all their culinary skills, for concealment is a vital part of the magic art of cooking, they told us enough to get things started. Experimental ingredients also became the order of the day. We became truly modern, doing away with the grinding, fermenting and sifting which defined much cooking at home. Certain dishes could now be produced more quickly and with far less toil. We also tried to substitute ingredients, which meant less work. I still remember my alarm when my mother proudly announced that citric acid powder could be used instead of tamarind, whose pungent and tangy flavor inflects key dishes in South Indian cuisine. Acid in food sounded truly dangerous to my childhood self, and I became reluctant to eat her cooking. But citric acid could never truly reproduce the same depth of flavor as our beloved tamarind, as my mother was quick to acknowledge. Luckily for me, it proved to be a short-lived substitute.

Most of our Indian friends worked at Bush House for the BBC World Service or at India House next door. Every gathering revolved around cooking meals

together, with people swapping skills and information, chatting all the while about the few places where we could go out and eat South Indian food. Our immediate circle was made up of other South Indians like us. But our culinary experiments expanded through friendships with Indians from other regions. It was a "dialectical interaction" as Appadurai describes it, which forged feelings of pan-Indianness among our cosmopolitan circle. They craved our dosais, we wanted to eat kofta. Through cooking, and eating together, we created new "affective geographies" in diaspora. Local borderlines dissolved into an Indian nationhood, which we experienced as intrinsically modern, in sharp contrast to the regional parochialisms we wanted so much to discard. Or so we thought.

Friends who had been in London longer than us taught my mother basic cooking skills. We have a photo of her first lesson. It is strange for me to see how unsure she seems in the kitchen. My mother became a wonderful cook, and many of my memories of her center on our relationship through food. Food would often reconcile what was to become a tempestuous mother-daughter relationship. I became a rebellious and no doubt tiresome teenager, perhaps more similar to my mother than I liked to acknowledge. My mother and I argued frequently, but our arguments were always silently resolved by her presenting me with a plate of my favorite puris and potato curry. Nothing was ever said, but this signaled that she was on the way to "forgiving" me for whatever misdemeanor I might have committed, and I always surrendered. The overture was comforting and healing, and bridged, if only temporarily, the growing rift between us. I felt loved and secure, and it restored the family bond between us.

As the years passed, my family hosted increasingly lavish dinner parties. We entertained a cosmopolitan mix of actors, artists and musicians, with many English friends thrown in to the mix. My mother often started cooking the day before, insisting on tackling everything by herself. I was rarely allowed into the kitchen while the preparations were in progress, as she sliced, mixed and stirred her way through the day. With these parties, we came to represent the exotic other at the heart of the postcolonial city. To our English friends, we were a symbol of the mixed-up times that were the "swinging sixties." Our guests reveled in being able to enjoy "genuine" Indian cooking in a "genuine" Indian home, food cooked, no less, by a "genuine" Indian dancer. Indian art graced our walls, and Indian artists were often persuaded to sing or play instruments in our living room. For a while, our claim to fame was based on a dubious distinction: Andrew Loog Oldham, then manager of the Rolling Stones, had thrown up in our bathroom. Heady days and nights! For a while at least, ours was the place to be, and my mother's food played no small part in that. Food gave us entry to a bohemian 1960s London, and it proved to be a moment to savor. By the 1970s, we were no longer exotic. To many Londoners we became "Pakis" and the smell of our food was something that attached itself to us and set us apart.

The range of dishes my mother cooked had grown exponentially from the early days. It now included North Indian cuisine and recipes transformed by my mother's interpretations. These latter dishes bore the traces not only of Iyengar

Brahmin cooking from my father's family, but also of culinary journeys which took in South Indian places as far afield as Mangalore, Tuticorin and the Andra Pradesh borderlands. They were a series of culinary palimpsests, maps which shadowed the complex movements of our forebears. Salt fields in Tuticorin, rice paddies in Polipakkum, spices from the Coramandel coast; their traces all found their way into the dishes my mother made her own. My forebears' shadows made it abundantly clear that our ideas of home, and the supposed rootedness we had escaped, were mere fictions we told ourselves about the sedentary nature of past family lives, supposedly in such stark contrast to our liberated, traveling, and very present selves.

At our parties, my mother was always at the heart of the action. She was at her best as she fed her guests and made people feel welcome. Her kitchen skills, and her love of feeding people, came to define a large part of who she was. And like thousands of other migrant women, through the domestic spaces of their migrant homes, she helped transform culinary tastes and changed the food landscapes of London for future generations.

Back in the early days in Putney, these party scenes would have seemed far-fetched to us. We had yet to learn how to be Indian in our new surroundings. Being exotic was an art that we had not remotely mastered. Perhaps it was different for my father. I suspect that at Oxford he played the part of the Indian intellectual with consummate ease. At those early food-filled gatherings in our small flat, the men drank yet more whiskey, while the women talked over the challenges of their new lives. We watched our tiny black-and-white television, me with wide-eyed wonder. We also got used to the cold. Our future seemed filled with possibility, a life unscripted, and all the more exciting for that. One night my mother was to appear on television, and friends flocked to Putney to watch with us. I remember struggling to keep my eyes open, only to face disappointment when the program was rescheduled at the last minute. Yet, the possibility that my mother might appear, dancing on that tiny ten-inch screen, seemed to mean we had somehow "arrived."

Our experiments in the kitchen eventually developed into an excellent repertoire of Indian cooking, but inevitably we also wanted to eat out. The biggest constraint in our migrant lives was being forced to spend so much time indoors. The nights when we dressed up and went out to eat were filled with anticipation and excitement about who we might meet, and what we might eat.

Most culinary histories of London describe the growth of Indian restaurants as if it was a mainly North Indian affair, even when chiefly run by Bangladeshis. But as early as the 1950s, we traveled culinary circuits in London that were distinctly South Indian. They were the outcome of accident and enterprise. If women changed the gastronomy of Britain from the spaces of the home, it was young men who transformed public culinary tastes across the country.

We often went to India Club. The Club was above a budget hotel across the road from India House in The Strand. It had been started by India's first High Commissioner, V. K. Krishna Menon, the distinguished South Indian politician

and socialist "rabble rouser." He intended India Club as a place where young Indian journalists living on a shoe-string could afford to go and eat. Krishna Menon recruited cooks from Tamil Nadu and Kerala who supplied masala dosai and rasam to an Indian intelligentsia working in London. For many, the Club was to become their "home," and offered respite from dingy bedsits and English landladies. The "southie" meals served there became a staple part of these young men's diet. Operating more in the style of a canteen, the Club was staffed by a motley crew. But they came to be like family, and witness to fluctuating fortunes and comings and goings over the years. They were also at the heart of the gossip networks that ran between India and London. The head waiter, Joseph, knew everyone and all their business. He took care of customers with grace and tact, and had the knack of making you feel special, creating the impression it was only you he didn't charge for the mango pickle. Less tactful, perhaps, was the chef, Ramalingam. Often whiskey-fuelled and overly fond of swearing, he was nevertheless a brilliant cook. He later opened the Ganpath restaurant on the Grays Inn Road, which was without doubt the best South Indian restaurant London has ever known. For many years, Joseph was assisted by a towering German waitress. She dwarfed him and they made an incongruous pair. Then there was Grace, who continued to serve in the bar well into her eighties. She was unable to leave the place that had become her home. By the end of her working life, you knew to serve yourself, while Grace, balancing on a bar stool, looked on and smiled.

India Club attracted many Labour Party and left-wing politicians as part of Krishna Menon's political circle. At times it became a socialist hotbed where the ends of empire were discussed with animation. Over the years, the Club became a British institution, home to that most British of things, the "Curry Club." It is now a somewhat dilapidated version of its former self. Nonetheless, it still attracts a fierce loyalty among those who knew it before, so criticize it at your peril! In those early days it offered sanctuary to scores of young men like my father who had traveled to London. It was a cosmopolitan place, where young Indians could look ahead to the brave new world promised by Empire's end. It was a place where Indians and the English met on equal terms and forged friendships over lovely food. I remember it as the site of many family celebrations, and as the place I've introduced many friends to the masala dosai. Today, Krishna Menon continues to look down from the walls, casting a critical eye on those who come and go. Nestling in the grand architecture around The Strand, in its time India Club was at the heart of an Indian social geography that beat in the midst of London's monumental center.

The India Club trained many young chefs brought over from "home" who were then set loose on the world. Ganpath and Vijays were among those offering South Indian cuisine. We were always greeted warmly and served exquisite food not to be found on the menu. Even in those postwar years, Indian restaurants prepared fare designed for a "restaurant culture" in preference to dishes which were made at home. In the process, they molded tastes and expectations which framed the public culture of Indian cuisine.

Our attempts at making a family did not succeed. Whiskey, which began by liberating my father, ended up making him its slave. He became increasingly unreliable and would not always come home. When he did return, we sometimes wished he hadn't. He was a gentle man, but people whose first love is drink are rarely much fun as fathers and husbands. In 1957, an Asian flu pandemic swept the globe. A million people were killed, including several thousand across England. In Putney, my mother caught the virus, and became extremely ill. After the doctor's visit, my father was dispatched with a prescription, but by the next day he still hadn't returned. My mother languished in bed, her temperature rocketing, and there was little food in the house. Eventually, she told me to go to the kitchen and get myself some bread. Processed white bread was always a staple in our home, and seemed oddly at ease among all the condiments and spices. As I stood on tiptoe to reach for the loaf, it slipped from my fingers and fell to the floor. I started to cry and couldn't stop. Other things were slipping away too, things not so easy to retrieve.

In the spring of 1958, my mother and I sailed back to India on the SS Chusan. We left my father behind to lead his modern life alone in our small Putney flat. Despite a visit to the pyramids, and a new teddy bear I was given in Port Said, the voyage was a miserable affair for me. I was unable to adjust to the ship's rolling motion, and was sick every day. I still recall the annoyance of the waiters as my mother took me back once more to the dining room, trying yet again to get me to eat. The meal would inevitably end in abject failure, and my unbalanced feelings of seasickness mirrored my confusion at being taken home and away from my father. I bought an Easter egg on the boat as a present for him, for I hadn't quite grasped how long it would be before I would see him again. Over time, and back on dry land, I was tempted more than once by the thought of the sweet chocolate inside the shiny paper. When I did see my father, he was bewildered when presented with a half-eaten Easter egg, which had melted several times, and then been lovingly refrozen in the fridge my mother had hauled back to India.

When we returned to Madras, the fact that my mother could cook, and intended to continue, was a source of great amusement to her family. Our English fridge took pride of place in the kitchen, a central part of our culinary life, and a more reliable member of our family than our flesh and blood relatives. They were patronizing about her cooking, but that must have been a small irritant in comparison to the chorus of "I told you so's" which greeted the news of my mother's failed marriage. She had left for England believing that she could defy convention, and make her life her own. Now, the family thought she had been cut down to size. What had she been thinking? She got a divorce, as rare as hen's teeth in Tamil Nadu, where a rigid conservatism still gripped much of society. My mother was seen as an embarrassment, and her life was not made easy. She was not welcomed back into the family and we were left largely to fend for ourselves. It would set us on course for an unconventional life, and freedoms we might otherwise never have known. But that didn't take away from the fact that we also struggled in those times.

I had started to miss English food. For her part, my mother frequently complained about the lack of convenient cooking ingredients. She would try to comfort me by taking me to the Empire Stores by cycle rickshaw to buy cornflakes and baked beans, or we would go to Spencers on Mount Road. Then the biggest department store in Asia, Spencers was housed in a famous pink confection of turrets and arched windows, much like a Disney castle. It had an air of what we took for international sophistication. Here you could glimpse electrical goods from "abroad" which cost a small fortune. None of them, according to my mother, compared to our English fridge. In Spencer's cafe, she would treat me to fizzy grape juice and ice cream. They also offered, as if by magic, mashed potato to jaded traveling palates which had been subjected to too much chili. By now, my mother missed the BBC. And we both moaned about the heat and longed for the cold of London. I "slept" under a whirring fan, frightened it would fall and chop my head off. And the gardens where I ran wild as a child were now fearful places for me. Back in London, my father had told me about a cobra which lived in an old hollow tree by our house in Mambalam. He claimed his mother fed it by moonlight. She left out a raw egg and a saucer of milk, he said, and the snake would come and eat. Satisfied, it would not turn its venom on the children who played in the garden. But how could you be sure? True or false, the story struck fear in me. The outside became full of ghostly shadows that couldn't be undone, and the slightest rustling in the undergrowth made me jump. Where was our home now?

My mother couldn't settle back into this home. Now her trips to the cinema to see American films became a substitute for the Western world we had left behind. The hallucinatory images on the screen were reminders of the liberties she thought she had lost. On Saturday afternoons I was sent to the movies by myself, dropped off and then collected at the end. I watched the films as if through shattered glass, Hollywood versions of the exotic elsewhere refracted back to my native eye. On my own in the dark, surrounded by hordes of excited, screaming Indian children, I sat perplexed through The Ten Commandments, shown in "glorious Technicolor," and peered at the screen and wondered at the exploits of Tarzan. Was this why my young English friends back home thought I lived in a hut in the jungle, surrounded by elephants and tigers? I had little sense of whether I was Indian, English or Tamil—all were foreign to me. And more important perhaps, I was foreign to everyone else. The edges of the map were the spaces where I found certainty.

But the cornflakes from Empire Stores never tasted right, and the baked beans always seemed stale. Cheese was a rubbery orange substance in tins christened Kraft, and the bread, even by the sorry standards of "sliced white," was literally a joke. It didn't really matter, for we ate very well, but these were supposed to be treats, conjured up to plug a void. Needless to say, they didn't fill the gap left by my missing father, an absence that provoked a powerful longing in me to be elsewhere, and an intense feeling of not belonging in any place we tried to call home. I had fallen into a deep and comforting space the moment when he picked me up in London. It was a space I never wanted to

leave, one which I always tried to return to. Somehow I never could. Something always kept him at bay. Unfairly perhaps, I blamed my mother for his loss in my life.

My mother and I had set up home by ourselves to escape her disapproving family, but it was an uncomfortable affair and we returned to London two years later. We went back by plane and left the fridge behind, along with a squawking green parrot we had bought at Moor Market, which drove us both mad. My mother moved on and found a new partner, also from Madras, who worked in the theater, and hosted the lavish dinner parties where we became a part of the London arts scene. And my life improved. It was extravagant, and above all food-filled and fun. The Indian food was delicious and the cornflakes were not stale. The white bread and baked beans slowly gave way to more sophisticated western tastes, and Italian cuisine became a clear favorite. The 1960s were a time of expanding horizons in London, when it came alive in "glorious Technicolor" and matters of culinary taste were no exception.

As time passed, I balanced my Indian life at home with the joys of being a young teenager in the heady world that was London at that time. By now we were also far more adept at being Indian, and our brief sojourn in Madras had reconfirmed the values of life in the West, however heavily inflected by Indian rhythms and tastes. But safely back in London, we now missed Madras! During that time, my father came and went between both cities, but could never settle in either. When he came to visit, he would fall upon my mother's cooking in what seemed like quiet desperation. He was mindful perhaps of the gap between his past hopes, which the food evoked, and what he had become. And it was no small gap. At Oxford, after all, his tutor had declared he was "a man of astonishing learning and exceptional brilliance" in one of his termly reports. Now he moved restlessly between jobs, performing his work half-heartedly. My father still craved my mother's food, but this was yet another visceral tie for a man who yearned to be free. This time the tie was to the uncomfortable space of their utopian, but failed relationship. On occasion he would mention the flat in Putney and mock my mother's early attempts at cooking rasam, a dish of hers he came to love dearly, as did I.

1968 was the year I became "political." The Tet Offensive, Black Power, the student and workers protests in May—these events animated me as nothing had before. I covered my school history books with pictures of Marx and Lenin, and my friends thought I was mad. Enoch Powell warned us of the "rivers of blood" to come, and it opened my eyes to an unequal world. Jimi Hendrix and The Doors played the soundtrack to highly-charged discussions about US imperialism, and what came first, race or class. Franz Fanon watched over me as I slept and whispered "it's more complicated." I became Indian with the fervor of the newly converted, a child of colonialism who now saw the world in its true light. I rediscovered my family's history and wore it like a badge of honor. Perhaps this seems strange, for I grew up in households that were wholly Indian; my mother never wore anything but saris, and her feet were never contained in shoes, even in the deep of winter. But my Indianness was

unconscious and everyday. I took it for granted and it was mediated by acculturation into English ways. My rediscovered Indianness was a political act, a defiant challenge to late 1960s Britain and its shifting relationship with its colonial others. It was a reaction to the immigration laws and to images of East Asians, landing at airports, with British passports that proved worthless. It was in defiance of the banners draped across the lions in Trafalgar Square declaring Britain was a "white man's country." It was a refusal to "go home," wherever that may be. It drew upon what was already in me, but mixed it up with the radical languages of liberation that were making themselves heard.

1968 was also the year my father died. I became increasingly distant from my mother. But with the passage of time, I came to crave her cooking, and perhaps some degree of reconciliation. Now her food evoked home in a different way, a mobile, sensory geography of belonging that couldn't be contained in houses, flats, or even countries. On my visits back from university, I would phone ahead to ask if she could be sure to make potato curry and puris for my first meal, the same food she had silently passed me when we had quarreled long before . My mother's food preserved the tenuous link between us, and also in time nurtured my partner, my friends and eventually my daughters as well.

History has repeated itself, but neither as tragedy nor farce. Instead its heartbeat is the politics of belonging, where migration transforms the self but only partly tames it. A wild otherness still waits in the wings, ready when needed to disrupt the fictions of homogeneity that surround us. My mother never taught me how to cook. Like her, when I left home, I taught myself. Popping mustard seeds, using sambhar water to make rasam, dosai mix fermenting in a cupboard, these were things repeated in our kitchen time after time. But my love of cooking Indian food is also part of the discovery of my Indianness in that summer of '68. With my English friends at school, and our cosmopolitan and unconventional lifestyle at home, I had a nebulous sense of self in me, and was quite content. I was happy to travel between several worlds but settle in none. But suddenly that was not enough. I needed to be Indian, to set myself apart from an idea of "Britishness" I did not like. Food helped me make that divide. My new conscious Indianness was painfully acquired, and learning to cook Indian food conjured up a vital part of who I thought I should be. Now, cooking is my space of comfort, a physical activity that defines a part of who I am. It expresses my roots elsewhere and my refusal to submit to simplistic scripts of loyalty and attachment. Like my mother before me, I crave the kitchen to myself, and work most happily when I'm at peace. With cricket on the radio, it is my perfect time, especially if India is winning, or better still, beating England. Like my mother, I never use recipes or measure out ingredients. But as I mix spices I often think of her, a gesture she might make or how she might move in her sari across the kitchen floor.

Now, the foodscapes of London are forever changed. The heteroglot spaces of the inner-city bristle with foods from everywhere, making visible the ingredients of a thousand cuisines. The tastes and smells of the city have been

heightened, and its migratory bones laid bare. The art of cooking has also been transformed; instruction, direction and information surround us as never before. But the culinary shadows linger too. My parents have returned to the shoreline in Madras, and found peace in the cobalt sea. But they still watch over me as I cook, reminding me of things past.

Ganpath is a ghostly absence on the Grays Inn Road and the past haunts India Club, as it invites would-be diners to come in and to "step back" in time. Joseph and Grace are long gone, replaced by younger blood. Other South Asian restaurants now use new measurements for authenticity and taste. They fuel 2 billion worth of income and employ over 70,000 people. They are living proof of the dynamics of movement, where migration nurtures new talent and enterprise. But the pathways to their kitchens can be traced through the small footsteps of those that came, and cooked, before. London's culinary archaeology is also encoded in these sites of migrant being. Memory, that "theater" of the past, makes visible these food pioneers, women and men, who in public and private, transformed the foodscapes of England, as they have elsewhere.

This memoir is dedicated to my parents.

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